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C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 002099

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TAGS: PTER PREL RP

SUBJECT: STATUS OF EFFORTS TO FREE ITALIAN PRIEST BOSSI

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Following the June 10 abduction in Zamboanga del Sur of Italian priest Father Giancarlo Bossi by ten armed men possibly associated with the terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has worked closely with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) to pinpoint his location and to explore options to rescue him. The MILF has "vehemently" denied any involvement in the capture of Father Bossi. The MILF also pledged its full support for rescue operations, stating that it is working with the AFP "to ensure the early recovery of the kidnap victim." There are no indications that Father Bossi was abducted for religious reasons, and it appears more likely to be a case of kidnapping for ransom.

¶2. (SBU) Coordination between the AFP and MILF under the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group (AHJAG) nonetheless stalled with the expiration on June 21 of its annual mandate. While both sides had expected the renewal of the mandate, the resignation on June 16 of Silvestre Afable as head of the Philippine Government Peace Panel with the MILF has left some confusion about who has authority to renew, especially given conflicting signals about who his successor would be. With the June 21 temporary appointment of Rudy Rodil -- previously Vice-Secretary of the government's peace panel and a professor at Mindanao State University -- as Officer-in-Charge of the panel for the time being, the renewal may happen soon. However, other reports indicate that Presidential Advisor for the Peace Process Jesus Dureza may have to issue the formal statement on behalf of the government. The MILF on June 21 nonetheless gave "special authority" to its AHJAG component to continue joint rescue operations with the AFP on "humanitarian grounds," stressing that "the life of man is of paramount importance over procedural matter."

¶3. (C) The Italian Embassy privately denied to poloff press reports that Italian Ambassador Rubens Fedele was prepared to negotiate on behalf of his government with the kidnappers and might even be willing to pay the ransom demanded by Bossi's abductors. According to an Italian Embassy source, there is no channel of communication with the kidnappers, nor any formal ransom request. Fedele, who remains in Mindanao, has publicly declared that responsibility for dealing with the kidnappers rested with the Philippine government, not the Italian government.

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